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Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street

Judith Butler

In the last months there have been, time and again, mass demonstrations on the street, in the square, and though these are very often motivated by different political purposes, something similar happens: bodies congregate, they move and speak together, and they lay claim to a certain space as public space. Now, it would be easier to say that these demonstrations or, indeed, these movements, are characterized by bodies that come together to make a claim in public space, but that formulation presumes that public space is given, that it is already public, and recognized as such. We miss something of the point of public demonstrations, if we fail to see that the very public character of the space is being disputed and even fought over when these crowds gather. So though these movements have depended on the prior existence of pavement, street, and square, and have often enough gathered in squares, like Tahrir, whose political history is potent, it is equally true that the collective actions collect the space itself, gather the pavement, and animate and organize the architecture. As much as we must insist on there being material conditions for public assembly and public speech, we have also to ask how it is that assembly and speech reconfigure the materiality of public space, and produce, or reproduce, the public character of that material environment. And when crowds move outside the square, to the side street or the back alley, to the neighborhoods where streets are not yet paved, then something more happens. At such a moment, politics is no longer defined as the exclusive business of public sphere distinct from a private one, but it crosses that line again and again, bringing attention to the way that politics is already in the home, or on the street, or in the neighborhood, or indeed in those virtual spaces that are unbound by the architecture of the public square. So when we think about what it means to assemble in a crowd, a growing crowd, and what it means to move through public space in a way that contests the distinction between public and private, we see some way that bodies in their plurality lay claim to the public, find and produce the public through seizing and reconfiguring the matter of material environments; at the same time, those material environments are part of the action, and they themselves act when they become the support for action. In the same way, when trucks or tanks suddenly become platforms for speakers, then the material environment is actively reconfigured and re-functioned, to use the Brechtian term. And our ideas of action then, need to be rethought. In

the first instance, no one mobilizes a claim to move and assemble freely without moving and assembling together with others. In the second instance, the square and the street are not only the material supports for action, but they themselves are part of any theory of public and corporeal action that we might propose. Human action depends upon all sorts of supports – it is always supported action. But in the case of public assemblies, we see quite clearly not only that there is a struggle over what will be public space, but a struggle as well over those basic ways in which we are, as bodies, supported in the world – a struggle against disenfranchisement, effacement, and abandonment.

Of course, this produces a quandary. We cannot act without supports, and yet we must struggle for the supports that allow us to act. Of course, it was the Roman idea of the public square that formed the background for understanding the rights of assembly and free speech, to the deliberate forms of participatory democracy. Hannah Arendt surely had the Roman Republic in mind when she claimed that all political action requires the "space of appearance." She writes, for instance, "the Polis, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be." The "true" space then lies "between the people" which means that as much as any action takes place somewhere located, it also establishes a space which belongs properly to alliance itself. For Arendt, this alliance is not tied to its location. In fact, alliance brings about its own location, highly transposable. She writes: "action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost anywhere and anytime." (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 198). So how do we understand this highly transposable conception of political space? Whereas Arendt maintains that politics requires the space of appearance, she also claims that space is precisely what politics brings about: "it is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men (sic) exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly." Something of what she says here is clearly true. Space and location are created through plural action. And yet, her view suggests that action, in its freedom and its power, has the exclusive power to create location. And such a view forgets or refuses that action is always supported, and that it is invariably bodily, even in its virtual forms. The material supports for action are not only part of action, but they are also what is being fought about, especially in those cases when the political struggle is about food, employment, mobility, and access to institutions. To rethink the space of appearance in order to understand the

power and effect of public demonstrations for our time, we will need to understand the bodily dimensions of action, what the body requires, and what the body can do, especially when we must think about bodies together, what holds them there, their conditions of persistence and of power.

This evening I would like to think about this space of appearance and to ask what itinerary must we travel to move from the space of appearance to the contemporary politics of the street? Even as I say this, I cannot hope to gather together all the forms of demonstration we have seen, some of which are episodic, some of which are part of ongoing and recurrent social and political movements, and some of which are revolutionary. I hope to think about what might gather together these gatherings, these public demonstrations during the winter of 2011 against tyrannical regimes in North Africa and the Middle East, but also against the escalating precarization of working peoples in Europe and in the Southern hemisphere, the struggles for public education throughout the US and Europe, and those struggles to make the street safe for women, gender and sexual minorities, including trans people, whose public appearance is too often punishable by legal and illegal violence. Very often the claim that is being made is that the streets must be made safe from the police who are complicit in criminality, especially on those occasions when the police support criminal regimes, or when, for instance, the police commit the very crimes against sexual and gender minorities that they are supposed to stop. Demonstrations are one of the few ways that police power is overcome, especially when they become too large and too mobile to be contained by police power, and when they have the resources to regenerate themselves. Perhaps these are anarchist moments or anarchist passages, when the legitimacy of a regime is called into question, but when no new regime has yet come to take its place. This time of the interval is the time of the popular will, not a single will, not a unitary will, but one that is characterized by an alliance with the performative power to lay claim to the public in a way that is not yet codified into law, and that can never be fully codified into law. How do we understand this acting together that opens up time and space outside and against the temporality and established architecture of the regime, one that lays claim to materiality, leans into its supports, draws from its supports, in order to rework their functions? Such an action reconfigures what will be public, and what will be the space of politics.

Arendt’s view is confounded by its own gender politics, relying as it does on a distinction between the public and private domain that leaves the sphere of politics to men, and reproductive labour to women. If there is a

body in the public sphere, it is masculine and unsupported, presumptively free to create, but not itself created. And the body in the private sphere is female, ageing, foreign, or childish, and pre-political. Although she was, as we know from the important work of Adriana Cavarero, a philosopher of natality, Arendt understood this capacity to bring something into being as a function of political speech and action. Indeed, when male citizens enter into the public square to debate questions of justice, revenge, war, and emancipation, they take the illuminated public square for granted as the architecturally bounded theatre of their speech. Their speech becomes the paradigmatic form of action, physically cut off from the private domicile, itself shrouded in darkness and reproduced through activities that are not quite action in the proper and public senses. Men make the passage from that private darkness to that public light and, once illuminated, they speak, and their speech interrogates the principles of justice it articulates, becoming itself a form of critical inquiry and democratic participation. For Arendt, rethinking this scene within political modernity, their speech is understood as the bodily and linguistic exercise of rights. Bodily and linguistic – how are we to understand these terms and their intertwining here?

For politics to take place, the body must appear. I appear to others, and they appear to me, which means that some space between us allows each to appear. We are not simply visual phenomena for each other – our voices must be registered, and so we must be heard; rather, who we are, bodily, is already a way of being "for" the other, appearing in ways that we cannot see, being a body for another in a way that I cannot be for myself, and so dispossessed, perspectivally, by our very sociality. I must appear to others in ways for which I cannot give an account, and in this way my body establishes a perspective that I cannot inhabit. This is an important point because it is not the case that the body only establishes my own perspective; it is also that which displaces that perspective, and makes that displacement into a necessity. This happens most clearly when we think about bodies that act together. No one body establishes the space of appearance, but this action, this performative exercise happens only "between" bodies, in a space that constitutes the gap between my own body and another's. In this way, my body does not act alone, when it acts politically. Indeed, the action emerged from the "between."

For Arendt, the body is not primarily located in space, but with others, brings about a new space. And the space that is created is precisely between those who act together. The space of appearance is not for her only an architectural given: "the space of appearance comes into being" she writes, "wherever men are together in the manner of speech and

action, and therefore predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government, that is, the various forms in which the public realm can be organized." (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 199) In other words, this space of appearance is not a location that can be separated from the plural action that brings it about. And yet, if we are to accept this view, we have to understand how the plurality that acts is itself constituted. How does a plurality form, and what material supports are necessary for that formation? Who enters this plurality, and who does not, and how are such matters decided? Can anyone and everyone act in such a way that this space is brought about? She makes clear that "this space does not always exist" and acknowledges that in the classical Polis, the slave, the foreigner, and the barbarian were excluded from such a space, which means that they could not become part of a plurality that brought this space into being. This means that part of the population did not appear, did not emerge into the space of appearance. And here we can see that the space of appearance was already divided, already apportioned, if the space of appearance was precisely that which was defined, in part, by their exclusion. This is no small problem since it means that one must already be in the space in order to bring the space of appearance into being – which means that a power operates prior to any performative power exercised by a plurality. Further, in her view, to be deprived of the space of appearance is to be deprived of reality. In other words, we must appear to others in ways that we ourselves cannot know, that we must become available to a perspective that established by a body that is not our own. And if we ask, where do we appear? Or where are we when we appear? It will be over there, between us, in a space that exists only because we are more than one, more than two, plural and embodied. The body, defined politically, is precisely organized by a perspective that is not one's own and is, in that sense, already elsewhere, for another, and so in departure from oneself.

On this account of the body in political space, how do we make sense of those who can never be part of that concerted action, who remain outside the plurality that acts? How do we describe their action and their status as beings disaggregated from the plural; what political language do we have in reserve for describing that exclusion? Are they the de-animated "givens" of political life, mere life or bare life? Are we to say that those who are excluded are simply unreal, or that they have no being at all - the socially dead, the spectral? Do such formulations denote a state of having been made destitute by existing political arrangements, or is this the destitution that is revealed outside the political sphere itself? In other words, are the destitute outside of politics and power, or are they in fact living out a specific form of political destitution? How we answer that question seems

important since if we claim that the destitute are outside of the sphere of politics – reduced to depoliticized forms of being – then we implicitly accept that the dominant ways of establishing the political are right. In some ways, this follows from the Arendtian position which adopts the internal point of view of the Greek Polis on what politics should be, who should gain entry into the public square and who should remain in the private sphere. Such a view disregards and devalues those forms of political agency that emerge precisely in those domains deemed pre-political or extra-political. So one reason we cannot let the political body that produces such exclusions furnish the conception of politics itself, setting the parameters for what counts as political - is that within the purview established by the Polis those outside its defining plurality are considered as unreal or unrealized and, hence, outside the political as such.

The impetus for Giorgio Agamben's notion of "bare life" derives from this very conception of the polis in Arendt's political philosophy and, I would suggest, runs the risk of this very problem: if we seek to take account of exclusion itself as a political problem, as part of politics itself, then it will not do to say that once excluded, those beings lack appearance or "reality" in political terms, that they have no social or political standing, or are cast out and reduced to mere being (forms of givenness precluded from the sphere of action). Nothing so metaphysically extravagant has to happen if we agree that one reason the sphere of the political cannot be defined by the classic conception of the Polis, is that we are then deprived of having and using a language for those forms of agency and resistance that focus on the politics of exclusion itself or, indeed, against those regimes of power that maintain the stateless and disenfranchised in conditions of destitution. Few matters could be more politically consequential.

Although Agamben borrows from Foucault to articulate a conception of the biopolitical, the thesis of "bare life" remains untouched by that conception. As a result, we cannot within that vocabulary describe the modes of agency and action undertaken by the stateless, the occupied, and the disenfranchised, since even the life stripped of rights is still within the sphere of the political, and is thus not reduced to mere being, but is, more often than not, angered, indignant, rising up and resisting. To be outside established and legitimate political structures is still to be saturated in power relations, and this saturation is the point of departure for a theory of the political that includes dominant and subjugated forms, modes of inclusion and legitimation as well as modes of delegitimation and effacement.

Luckily, I think Arendt does not consistently follow this model from *The*

Human Condition, which is why, for instance, in the early 1960s she turns her attention to the fate of refugees and the stateless, and comes to assert in that context the right to have rights. The right to have rights is one that depends on no existing particular political organization for its legitimacy. In her words, the right to have rights predates and precedes any political institution that might codify or seek to guarantee that right; at the same time, it is derived from no natural set of laws. The right comes into being when it is exercised, and exercised by those who act in concert, in alliance. Those who are excluded from existing polities, who belong to no nation-state or other contemporary state formation may be "unreal" only by those who seek to monopolize the terms of reality. And yet even after the public sphere has been defined through their exclusion, they act. Whether abandoned to precarity or left to die through systematic negligence, concerted action still emerges from such sites. And this is what we see, for instance, when undocumented workers amass on the street without the legal right to do so, when populations lay claim to a public square that has belonged to the military, or when the refugees take place in collective uprisings demanding shelter, food, and rights of mobility, when populations amass, without the protection of the law and without permits to demonstrate, to bring down an unjust or criminal regime of law or to protest austerity measures that destroy the possibility of employment and education for many.

Indeed, in the public demonstrations that often follow from acts of public mourning, especially in Syria in recent months where crowds of mourners become targets of military destruction, we can see how the existing public space is seized by those who have no existing right to gather there, and whose lives are exposed to violence and death in the course of gathering as they do. Indeed, it is their right to gather free of intimidation and threat of violence that is systematically attacked by the police or by the army or by mercenaries on hire by both the state and corporate powers. To attack the body is to attack the right itself, since the right is precisely what is exercised by the body on the street. Although the bodies on the street are vocalizing their opposition to the legitimacy of the state, they are also, by virtue of occupying that space, repeating that occupation of space, and persisting in that occupation of space, posing the challenge in corporeal terms, which means that when the body "speaks" politically, it is not only in vocal or written language. The persistence of the body calls that legitimacy into question, and does so precisely through a performativity of the body that crosses language without ever quite reducing to language. In other words, it is not that bodily action and gesture have to be translated into language, but that both action and gesture signify and speak, as action and claim, and that the one is not finally extricable from the other. Where

the legitimacy of the state is brought into question precisely by that way of appearing in public, the body itself exercises a right that is no right; in other words, it exercises a right that is being actively contested and destroyed by military force, and which, in its resistance to force, articulates its persistence, and its right to persistence. This right is codified nowhere. It is not granted from elsewhere or by existing law, even if it sometimes finds support precisely there. It is, in fact, the right to have rights, not as natural law or metaphysical stipulation, but as the persistence of the body against those forces that seek to monopolize legitimacy. A persistence that requires the mobilization of space, and that cannot happen without a set of material supports mobilized and mobilizing.

Just to be clear: I am not referring to a vitalism or a right to life as such. Rather, I am suggesting that political claims are made by bodies as they appear and act, as they refuse and as they persist under conditions in which that fact alone is taken to be an act of delegitimation of the state. It is not that bodies are simply mute life-forces that counter existing modalities of power. Rather, they are themselves modalities of power, embodied interpretations, engaging in allied action. On the one hand, these bodies are productive and performative. On the other hand, they can only persist and act when they are supported, by environments, by nutrition, by work, by modes of sociality and belonging. And when these supports fall away, they are mobilized in another way, seizing upon the supports that exist in order to make a claim that there can be no embodied life without social and institutional support, without ongoing employment, without networks of interdependency and care. They struggle not only for the idea of social support and political enfranchisement, but their struggle takes on a social form of its own. And so, in the most ideal instances, an alliance enacts the social order it seeks to bring about, but when this happens, and it does happen, we have to be mindful of two important caveats. The first is that the alliance is not reducible to individuals, and it is not individuals who act. The second is that action in alliance happens precisely between those who participate, and this is not an ideal or empty space – it is the space of support itself – of durable and liveable material environments and of interdependency among living beings. I will move toward this last idea toward the end of my remarks this evening. But let us return to the demonstrations, in their logic and in their instances.

It is not only that many of the massive demonstrations and modes of resistance we have seen in the last months produce a space of appearance, they also seize upon an already established space permeated by existing power, seeking to sever the relation between the public space, the public square, and the existing regime. So the limits of

the political are exposed, and the link between the theatre of legitimacy and public space is severed; that theatre is no longer unproblematically housed in public space, since public space now occurs in the midst of another action, one that displaces the power that claims legitimacy precisely by taking over the field of its effects. Simply put, the bodies on the street redeploy the space of appearance in order to contest and negate the existing forms of political legitimacy – and just as they sometimes fill or take over public space, the material history of those structures also work on them, and become part of their very action, remaking a history in the midst of its most concrete and sedimented artifices. These are subjugated and empowered actors who seek to wrest legitimacy from an existing state apparatus that depends upon the public space of appearance for its theatrical self-constitution. In wresting that power, a new space is created, a new "between" of bodies, as it were, that lays claim to existing space through the action of a new alliance, and those bodies are seized and animated by those existing spaces in the very acts by which they reclaim and resignify their meanings.

For this contestation to work, there has to be a hegemonic struggle over what we are calling the space of appearance. Such a struggle intervenes in the spatial organization of power, which includes the allocation and restriction of spatial locations in which and by which any population may appear, which means that there is a spatial restriction on when and how the "popular will" may appear. This view of the spatial restriction and allocation of who may appear, in effect, who may become a subject of appearance, suggests an operation of power that works through both foreclosure and differential allocation. How is such an idea of power, and its corollary idea of politics, to be reconciled with the Arendtian proposition that politics requires not only entering into a space of appearance, but an active participation in the making of the space of appearance itself. And further, I would add, it requires a way of acting in the midst of being formed by that history and its material structures.

One can see the operation of a strong performative in Arendt's work – in acting, we bring the space of politics into being, understood as the space of appearance. It is a divine performative allocated to the human form. But as a result, she cannot account for the ways in which the established architecture and topographies of power act upon us, and enter into our very action sometimes foreclosing our entry into the political sphere, or making us differentially apparent within that sphere. And yet, to work within these two forms of power, we have to think about bodies in ways that Arendt does not do, and we have to think about space as acting on us, even as we act within it, or even when sometimes our actions, considered

as plural or collective, bring it into being.

If we consider what it is to appear, it follows that we appear to someone, and that our appearance has to be registered by the senses, not only our own, but someone else's, or some larger group. For the Arendtian position, it follows that to act and speak politically we must "appear" to one another in some way, that is to say, that to appear is always to appear for another, which means that for the body to exist politically, it has to assume a social dimension – it is comported outside itself and toward others in ways that cannot and do not ratify individualism. Assuming that we are living and embodied organisms when we speak and act, the organism assumes social and political form in the space of appearance. This does not mean that we overcome or negate some biological status to assume a social one; on the contrary, the organic bodies that we are require a sustaining social world in order to persist. And this means that as biological creatures who seek to persist, we are necessarily dependent on social relations and institutions that address the basic needs for food, shelter, and protection from violence, to name a few. No monadic body simply persists on its own, but if it persists, it is in the context of a sustaining set of relations. So if we approach the question of the bio-political in this way, we can see that the space of appearance does not belong to a sphere of politics separate from a sphere of survival and of need. When the question of the survival not only of individuals, but whole populations, is at issue, then the political issue has to do with whether and how a social and political formation addresses the demand to provide for basic needs such as shelter and food, and protection against violence. And the question for a critical and contesting politics has to do with how basic goods are distributed, how life itself is allocated, and how the unequal distribution of the value and grievability of life is instituted by targeted warfare as well as systematic forms of exploitation or negligence, which render populations differentially precarious and disposable.

A quite problematic division of labor is at work in Arendt's position, which is why we must rethink her position for our times. If we appear, we must be seen, which means that our bodies must be viewed and their vocalized sounds must be heard: the body must enter the visual and audible field. But we have to ask why, if this is so, the body is itself divided into the one that appears publically to speak and act, and another, sexual and laboring, feminine, foreign and mute, that generally relegated to the private and pre-political sphere. That latter body operates as a precondition for appearance, and so becomes the structuring absence that governs and makes possible the public sphere. If we are living organisms who speak and act, then we are clearly related to a vast continuum or network of living

beings; we not only live among them, but our persistence as living organisms depends on that matrix of sustaining interdependent relations. And yet, if our speaking and acting distinguishes us as something separate from that corporeal realm (raised earlier by the question of whether our capacity to think politically depends on one sort of physei or another), we have to ask how such a duality between action and body can be preserved if and when the "living" word and "actual" deed – both clearly political – so clearly presuppose the presence and action of a living human body, one whose life is bound up with other living processes. It may be that two senses of the body are at work for Arendt – one that appears in public, and another that is "sequestered" in private –, and that the public body is one that makes itself known as the figure of the speaking subject, one whose speech is also action. The private body never appears as such, since it is preoccupied with the repetitive labor of reproducing the material conditions of life. The private body thus conditions the public body, and even though they are the same body, the bifurcation is crucial to maintaining the public and private distinction. Perhaps this is a kind of fantasy that one dimension of bodily life can and must remain out of sight, and yet another, fully distinct, appears in public? But is there no trace of the biological that appears as such, and could we not argue, with Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers, that negotiating the sphere of appearance is a biological thing to do, since there is no way of navigating an environment or procuring food without appearing bodily in the world, and there is no escape from the vulnerability and mobility that appearing in the world implies? In other words, is appearance not a necessarily morphological moment where the body appears, and not only in order to speak and act, but also to suffer and to move, to engage others bodies, to negotiate an environment on which one depends? Indeed, the body can appear and signify in ways that contest the way it speaks, or even contest speaking as its paradigmatic instance. Indeed, could we still understand action, gesture, stillness, touch, and moving together, if they were all reducible to the vocalization of thought through speech?

Indeed, this act of public speaking, even within that problematic division of labour, *depends upon* a dimension of bodily life that is given, passive, opaque and so excluded from the realm of the political. Hence, we can ask, what regulation keeps the given body from spilling over into the active body? Are these two different bodies and what politics is required to keep them apart? Are these two different dimensions of the same body, or are these, in fact, the effect of a certain regulation of bodily appearance that is actively contested by new social movements, struggles against sexual violence, for reproductive freedom, against precarity, for the freedom of mobility? Here we can see that a certain topographical or even

architectural regulation of the body happens at the level of theory. Significantly, it is precisely this operation of power – foreclosure and differential allocation of whether and how the body may appear – which is excluded from Arendt's explicit account of the political. Indeed, her explicit account of the political depends upon that very operation of power that it fails to consider as part of politics itself.

So what I accept is the following: Freedom does not come from me or from you; it can and does happen as a relation between us or, indeed, among us. So this is not a matter of finding the human dignity within each person, but rather of understanding the human as a relational and social being, one whose action depends upon equality and articulates the principle of equality. Indeed, there is no human on her view if there is no equality. No human can be human alone. And no human can be human without acting in concert with others and on conditions of equality. I would add the following: The claim of equality is not only spoken or written, but is made precisely when bodies appear together or, rather, when, through their action, they bring the space of appearance into being. This space is a feature and effect of action, and it only works, according to Arendt, when relations of equality are maintained.

Of course, there are many reasons to be suspicious of idealized moments, but there are also reasons to be wary of any analysis that is fully guarded against idealization. There are two aspects of the revolutionary demonstrations in Tahrir square that I would like to underscore. The first has to do with the way a certain sociability was established within the square, a division of labor that broke down gender difference, that involved rotating who would speak and who would clean the areas where people slept and ate, developing a work schedule for everyone to maintain the environment and to clean the toilets. In short, what some would call "horizontal relations" among the protestors formed easily and methodically, and quickly it seemed that relations of equality, which included an equal division of labour between the sexes, became part of the very resistance to Mubarek's regime and its entrenched hierarchies, including the extraordinary differentials of wealth between the military and corporate sponsors of the regime, and the working people. So the social form of the resistance began to incorporate principles of equality that governed not only how and when people spoke and acted for the media and against the regime, but how people cared for their various quarters within the square, the beds on pavement, the makeshift medical stations and bathrooms, the places where people ate, and the places where people were exposed to violence from the outside. These actions were all political in the simple sense that they were breaking down a conventional distinction between

public and private in order to establish relations of equality; in this sense, they were incorporating into the very social form of resistance the principles for which they were struggling on the street.

Secondly, when up against violent attack or extreme threats, many people chanted the word "silmiyya" which comes from the root verb (salima) which means to be safe and sound, unharmed, unimpaired, intact, safe, and secure; but also, to be unobjectionable, blameless, faultless; and yet also, to be certain, established, clearly proven[1]. The term comes from the noun "silm" which means "peace" but also, interchangeably and significantly, "the religion of Islam." One variant of the term is “Hubb as-silm” which is Arabic for "pacifism." Most usually, the chanting of “Silmiyya” comes across as a gentle exhortation: “peaceful, peaceful.” Although the revolution was for the most part non-violent, it was not necessarily led by a principled opposition to violence. Rather, the collective chant was a way of encouraging people to resist the mimetic pull of military aggression – and the aggression of the gangs – by keeping in mind the larger goal – radical democratic change. To be swept into a violent exchange of the moment was to lose the patience needed to realize the revolution. What interests me here is the chant, the way in which language worked not to incite an action, but to restrain one. A restraint in the name of an emerging community of equals whose primary way of doing politics would not be violence.

Of course, Tahrir Square is a place, and we can locate it quite precisely on the map of Cairo. At the same time, we find questions posed throughout the media: will the Palestinians have their Tahrir square? Where is the Tahrir Square in India? To name but a few. So it is located, and it is transposable; indeed, it seemed to be transposable from the start, though never completely. And, of course, we cannot think the transposability of those bodies in the square without the media. In some ways, the media images from Tunisia prepared the way for the media events in Tahrir, and then those that followed in Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, and Libya, all of which took different trajectories, and take them still. As you know many of the public demonstrations of these last months have not been against military dictatorships or tyrannical regimes. They have also been against the monopoly capitalism, neo-liberalism, and the suppression of political rights, and in the name of those who are abandoned by neo-liberal reforms that seek to dismantle forms of social democracy and socialism, that eradicate jobs, expose populations to poverty, and undermine the basic right to a public education.

The street scenes become politically potent only when and if we have a

visual and audible version of the scene communicated in live time, so that the media does not merely report the scene, but is part of the scene and the action; indeed, the media *is* the scene or the space in its extended and replicable visual and audible dimensions. One way of stating this is simply that the media extends the scene visually and audibly and participates in the delimitation and transposability of the scene. Put differently, the media constitutes the scene in a time and place that includes and exceeds its local instantiation. Although the scene is surely and emphatically local, and those who are elsewhere have the sense that they are getting some direct access through the images and sounds they receive. That is true, but they do not know how the editing takes place, which scene conveys and travels, and which scenes remain obdurately outside the frame. When the scene does travel, it is both there *and* here, and if it were not spanning both locations – indeed, multiple locations – it would not be the scene that it is. Its locality is not denied by the fact that the scene is communicated beyond itself, and so constituted in a global media; it depends on that mediation to take place as the event that it is. This means that the local must be recast outside itself in order to be established as local, and this means that it is only through a certain globalizing media that the local can be established, and that something can really happen there. Of course, many things do happen outside the frame of the camera or other digital media devices, and the media can just as easily implement censorship as oppose it. There are many local events that are never recorded and broadcast, and some important reasons why. But when the event does travel and manages to summon and sustain global outrage and pressure, which includes the power to stop markets or to sever diplomatic relations, then the local will have to be established time and again in a circuitry that exceeds the local at every instant. And yet, there remains something localized that cannot and does not travel in that way; and the scene could not be the scene if we did not understand that some people are at risk, and the risk is run precisely by those bodies on the street. If they are transported in one way, they are surely left in place in another, holding the camera or the cell phone, face to face with those they oppose, unprotected, injurable, injured, persistent, if not insurgent. It matters that those bodies carry cell phones, relaying messages and images, and so when they are attacked, it is more often than not in some relation to the camera or the video recorder. It can be an effort to destroy the camera and its user, or it can be a spectacle of destruction for the camera, a media event produced as a warning or a threat. Or it can be a way to stop any more organizing. Is the action of the body separable from its technology, and how does the technology determine new forms of political action? And when censorship or violence are directed against those bodies, are they not also directed against its access to media, and in order to establish hegemonic control over which

images travel, and which do not?

Of course, the dominant media is corporately owned, exercising its own kinds of censorship and incitement. And yet, it still seems important to affirm that the freedom of the media to broadcast from these sites is itself an exercise of freedom, and so a mode of exercising rights, especially when it is rogue media, from the street, evading the censor, where the activation of the instrument is part of the bodily action itself. So the media not only reports on social and political movements that are laying claim to freedom and justice in various ways; the media is also exercising one of those freedoms for which the social movement struggles. I do not mean by this claim to suggest that all media is involved in the struggle for political freedom and social justice (we know, of course, that it is not). Of course, it matters which global media does the reporting and how. My point is that sometimes private media devices become global precisely at the moment in which they overcome modes of censorship to report protests and, in that way, become part of the protest itself.

What bodies are doing on the street when they are demonstrating, is linked fundamentally to what communication devices and technologies are doing when they “report” on what is happening in the street. These are different actions, but they both require bodily actions. The one exercise of freedom is linked to the other exercise, which means that both are ways of exercising rights, and that jointly they bring a space of appearance into being and secure its transposability. Although some may wager that the exercise of rights now takes place quite at the expense of bodies on the street, that twitter and other virtual technologies have led to a disembodiment of the public sphere, I disagree. The media requires those bodies on the street to have an event, even as the street requires the media to exist in a global arena. But under conditions when those with cameras or internet capacities are imprisoned or tortured or deported, then the use of the technology effectively implicates the body. Not only must someone’s hand tap and send, but someone’s body is on the line if that tapping and sending gets traced. In other words, localization is hardly overcome through the use of a media that potentially transmits globally. And if this conjuncture of street and media constitutes a very contemporary version of the public sphere, then bodies on the line have to be thought as both there and here, now and then, transported and stationery, with very different political consequences following from those two modalities of space and time.

It matters that it is public squares that are filled to the brim, that people eat and sleep there, sing and refuse to cede that space, as we saw in Tahrir

Square, and continue to see on a daily basis. It matters as well that it is public educational buildings that have been seized in Athens, London, and Berkeley. At Berkeley, buildings were seized, and trespassing fines were handed out. In some cases, students were accused of destroying private property. But these very allegations raised the question of whether the university is public or private. The stated aim of the protest – to seize the building and to sequester themselves there – was a way to gain a platform, indeed, a way to secure the material conditions for appearing in public. Such actions generally do not take place when effective platforms are already available. The students there, but also at Goldsmiths College in the UK more recently were seizing buildings as a way to lay claim to buildings that ought properly, now and in the future, to belong to public education. That doesn't mean that every time these buildings are seized it is justifiable, but let us be alert to what is at stake here: the symbolic meaning of seizing these buildings is that these buildings belong to the public, to public education; it is precisely the access to public education which is being undermined by fee and tuition hikes and budget cuts; we should not be surprised that the protest took the form of seizing the buildings, performatively laying claim to public education, insisting on gaining literal access to the buildings of public education precisely at a moment, historically, when that access is being shut down. In other words, no positive law justifies these actions that oppose the institutionalization of unjust or exclusionary forms of power. So can we say that these actions are nevertheless an exercise of a right and, if so, what kind?

Modes of Alliance and the Police Function

Let me offer you an anecdote to make my point more concrete. Last year, I was asked to visit Turkey on the occasion of the International Conference against Homophobia and Transphobia. This was an especially important event in Ankara, the capital of Turkey, where transgendered people are often served fines for appearing in public, are often beaten, sometimes by the police, and where murders of transgendered women in particular happen nearly once a month in recent years. If I offer you this example of Turkey, it is not to point out that Turkey is “behind” – something that the embassy representative from Denmark was quick to point out to me, and which I refused with equal speed. I assure you that there are equally brutal murders outside of Los Angeles and Detroit, in Wyoming and Louisiana, or even New York. It is rather because what is astonishing about the alliances there is that several feminist organizations have worked with queer, gay/lesbian and transgendered people against police violence, but also against militarism, against nationalism, and against the forms of masculinism by which they are supported. So on the street, after the

conference, the feminist lined up with the drag queens, the genderqueer with the human rights activists, and the lipstick lesbians with their bisexual and heterosexual friends – the march included secularists and muslims. They chanted, “we will not be soldiers, and we will not kill.” To oppose the police violence against trans people is thus to be openly against military violence and the nationalist escalation of militarism; it is also to be against the military aggression against the Kurds, but also, to act in the memory of the Armenian genocide and against the various ways that violence is disavowed by the state and the media.

This alliance was compelling for me for all kinds of reasons, but mainly because in most Northern European countries, there are now serious divisions among feminists, queers, lesbian and gay human rights workers, anti-racist movements, freedom of religion movements, and anti- poverty and anti-war mobilizations. In Lyon, France last year, one of the established feminists had written a book on the “illusion” of transsexuality, and her public lectures had been “zapped” by many trans activists and their queer allies. She defended herself by saying that to call transsexuality psychotic was not the same as pathologizing transsexuality. It is, she said, a descriptive term, and makes no judgment or prescription. Under what conditions can calling a population “psychotic” for the particular embodied life they live not be pathologizing? This feminist called herself a materialist, a radical, but she pitted herself against the transgendered community in order to maintain certain norms of masculinity and femininity as pre-requisites to a non-psychotic life. These are arguments that would be swiftly countered in Istanbul or Johannesburg, and yet, these same feminists seek recourse to a form of universalism that would make France, and their version of French feminism, into the beacon of progressive thought.

Not all French feminists who call themselves universalists would oppose the public rights of transgendered people, or contribute to their pathologization. And yet, if the streets are open to transgendered people, they are not open to those who wear signs of their religious belonging openly. Hence, we are left to fathom the many universalist French feminists who call upon the police to arrest, detain, fine, and sometimes deport women wearing the Niqab or the Burka in the public sphere in France. What sort of politics is this that recruits the police function of the state to monitor and restrict women from religious minorities in the public sphere? Why would the same universalists (Elisabeth Badinter) openly affirm the rights of transgendered people to freely appear in public while restricting that very right to women who happen to wear religious clothing that offends the sensibilities of die-hard secularists? If the right to appear is

to be honored “universally” it would not be able to survive such an obvious and insupportable contradiction.[2]

To walk on the street without police interference is something other than assembling there en masse. And yet, when a transgendered person walks there, the right that is exercised in a bodily form does not only belong to that one person. There is a group, if not an alliance, walking there, too, whether or not they are seen. Perhaps we can call “performative” both this exercise of gender and the embodied political claim to equal treatment, to be protected from violence, and to be able to move with and within this social category in public space. To walk is to say that this is a public space in which transgendered people walk, that this is a public space where people with various forms of clothing, no matter how they are gendered or what religion they signify, are free to move without threat of violence. But this performativity applies more broadly to the conditions by which any of us emerge as bodily creatures in the world.

How, finally, do we understand this body? Is it a distinctively human body, a gendered body, and is it finally possible to distinguish between that domain of the body that is given and that which is made? If we invest in humans the power to make the body into a political signifier, then do we assume that in becoming political, the body distinguishes itself from its own animality and the sphere of animals? In other words, how do we think this idea of the exercise of freedom and rights within the space of appearance that takes us beyond anthropocentrism? Here again, I think the conception of the living body is key. After all, the life that is worth preserving, even when considered exclusively human, is connected to non-human life in essential ways; this follows from the idea of the human animal. Thus, if we are thinking well, and our thinking commits us to the preservation of life in some form, then the life to be preserved takes a bodily form. In turn, this means that the life of the body – its hunger, its need for shelter and protection from violence – would all become major issues of politics. Even the most given or non-chosen features of our lives are not simply given; they are given *in* history and *in* language, in vectors of power that none of us chose. Equally true is that a given property of the body or a set of defining characteristics depend upon the continuing persistence of the body. Those social categories we never chose traverse this body that is given in some ways rather than in others, and gender, for instance, names that traversal as well as the trajectory of its transformations. In this sense, those most urgent and non-volitional dimensions of our lives, which include hunger and the need for shelter, medical care, and protection from violence, natural or humanly imposed, are crucial to politics. We cannot presume the enclosed and well-fed space of the Polis where all the

material needs are somehow being taken care of elsewhere by beings whose gender, race, or status render them ineligible for public recognition. Rather, we have to not only bring the material urgencies of the body into the square, but make those needs central to the demands of politics.

In my view, a different social ontology would have to start from the presumption that there is a shared condition of precarity that situates our political lives. And some of us, as Ruthie Gilmore has made very clear, are disproportionately disposed to injury and early death than others, and racial difference can be tracked precisely through looking at statistics on infant mortality; this means, in brief, that precarity is unequally distributed and that lives are not considered equally grievable or equally valuable. If, as Adriana Cavarero has argued, the exposure of our bodies in public space constitutes us fundamentally, and establishes our thinking as social and embodied, vulnerable and passionate, then our thinking gets nowhere without the presupposition of that very corporeal interdependency and entwinement. The body is constituted through perspectives it cannot inhabit; someone else sees our face in a way that none of us can. We are in this way, even as located, always elsewhere, constituted in a sociality that exceeds us. This establishes our exposure and our precarity, the ways in which we depend on political and social institutions to persist.

After all, in Cairo, it was not just that people amassed in the square: they were there; they slept there; they dispensed medicine and food, they assembled and sang, and they spoke. Can we distinguish those vocalizations from the body from those other expressions of material need and urgency? They were, after all, sleeping and eating in the public square, constructing toilets and various systems for sharing the space, and so not only refusing to be privatized – refusing to go or stay home – and not only claiming the public domain for themselves – acting in concert on conditions of equality – but also maintaining themselves as persisting bodies with needs, desires, and requirements. Arendtian and counter-Arendtian, to be sure. Since these bodies who were organizing their most basic needs in public were also petitioning the world to register what was happening there, to make its support known, and in that way to enter into revolutionary action itself. The bodies acted in concert, but they also slept in public, and in both these modalities, they were both vulnerable and demanding, giving political and spatial organization to elementary bodily needs. In this way, they formed themselves into images to be projected to all of who watched, petitioning us to receive and respond, and so to enlist media coverage that would refuse to let the event be covered over or to slip away. Sleeping on that pavement was not only a way to lay claim to the public, to contest the legitimacy of the state, but also quite clearly, a

way to put the body on the line in its insistence, obduracy and precarity, overcoming the distinction between public and private for the time of revolution. In other words, it was only when those needs that are supposed to remain private came out into the day and night of the square, formed into image and discourse for the media, did it finally become possible to extend the space and time of the event with such tenacity to bring the regime down. After all, the cameras never stopped, bodies were there and here, they never stopped speaking, not even in sleep, and so could not be silenced, sequestered or denied – revolution happened because everyone refused to go home, cleaving to the pavement, acting in concert.

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[1] from Hans Wehr's Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic.

[2] Perhaps there are modalities of violence that we need to think about in order to understand the police functions in operation here. After all, those who insist that gender must always appear in one way or in one clothed version rather than another, who seek either to criminalize or to pathologize those who live their gender or their sexuality in non-normative ways, are themselves acting as the police for the sphere of appearance whether or not they belong to any police force. As we know, it is sometimes the police force of the state that does violence to sexual and gendered minorities, and sometimes it is the police who fail to investigate, fail to prosecute as criminal the murder of transgendered women, or fail to prevent violence against transgendered members of the population. If gender or sexual minorities are criminalized or pathologized for how they appear, how they lay claim to public space, the language through which they understand themselves, the means by which they express love or desire, those with whom they openly ally, choose to be near, engage sexually, or how they exercise their bodily freedom, what clothes they wear or fail to wear, then those acts of criminalization are themselves violent; and in that sense, they are also unjust and criminal. In Arendtian terms, we can say that to be precluded from the space of appearance, to be precluded from being part of the plurality that brings the space of appearance into being, is to be deprived of the right to have rights. Plural and public action is the exercise of the right to place and belonging, and this exercise is the means by which the space of appearance is presupposed and brought into being. Let me return to the notion of gender

with which I began, both to draw upon Arendt and to resist Arendt. In my view, gender is an exercise of freedom, which is not to say that everything that constitutes gender is freely chosen, but only that even what is considered unfree can and must be claimed and exercised in some way. I have, with this formulation, taken a certain distance from the Arendtian formulation. This exercise of freedom must be accorded the same equal treatment as any other exercise of freedom under the law. And politically, we must call for the expansion of our conceptions of equality to include this form of embodied freedom. So what do we mean when we say that sexuality or gender is an exercise of freedom? To repeat: I do not mean to say that all of us choose our gender or our sexuality. We are surely formed by language and culture, by history, by the social struggles in which we participate, by forces both psychological and historical – in interaction, by the way with biological situations that have their own history and efficacy. Indeed, we may well feel that what and how we desire are quite fixed, indelible or irreversible features of who we are. But regardless of whether we understand our gender or our sexuality as chosen or given, we each have a right to claim that gender and to claim that sexuality. And it makes a difference whether we can claim them at all. When we exercise the right to appear as the gender we already are – even when we feel we have no other choice – we are still exercising a certain freedom, but we are also doing something more. When one freely exercises the right to be who one already is, and one asserts a social category for the purposes of describing that mode of being, then one is, in fact, making freedom part of that very social category, discursively changing the very ontology in question. It is not possible to separate the genders that we claim to be and the sexualities that we engage from the right that any of us has to assert those realities in public or in private, or in the many thresholds that exist between the two, freely, that is, without threat of violence. When, long ago, one said that gender is performative, that meant that it is a certain kind of enactment, which means that one is not first one's gender and then one decides how and when to enact it. The enactment is part of its very ontology, is a way of rethinking the ontological mode of gender, and so it matters how and when and with what consequences that enactment takes place, because all that changes the very gender that one "is."

http://eipcp.net/transversal/1011/butler/en
Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street